



DANIEL ELLSBERG. PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG MORFET.

## The Left Was Right

### Daniel Ellsberg

by Gisela Martine Getty

Daniel Ellsberg Xeroxed his way to notoriety when, as a researcher for the Rand Corporation, he copied what became known as the Pentagon Papers. The document—a 43-volume study tracing U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia from 1945 to 1968—was made public in 1971, when it was passed on to *The New York Times*, an action that unquestionably shortened America's military involvement in Viet-

nam. The veteran analyst was rewarded for his efforts with a twelve-count indictment in federal court on charges of espionage, theft and conspiracy; a federal judge later threw out the charges, citing instead a pattern of governmental misconduct against Ellsberg.

In a 1971 cover story, *Time* magazine asked, "Who is this man Ellsberg, who dares to challenge four presidents, assails

the decisions of some of the keenest minds ever to have been attracted to national security service, and scatters classified documents like chain letters across the country?"

Ellsberg's résumé provides an answer. A summa cum laude graduate of Harvard, where he later received a Ph.D., Ellsberg wrote both his undergraduate and graduate theses on "Decision-making Under

Uncertainty." He went on to become a utility insider in the military-industrial complex, working at different times as a high-level researcher for both the government and the Rand Corporation, concentrating on areas of national security such as nuclear-war planning, the command and control of nuclear weapons and ... Vietnam. In the mid-1960s he saw that country firsthand, serving the United



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States there as a Senior Liaison Officer and Special Assistant to the Deputy Ambassador with the duty of evaluating pacification.

Ellsberg later served on the strategy task force of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. Today he is on the board of directors of SANE (Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy). He is highly visible as a lecturer, writer and lobbyist to Congress on the risks of both the nuclear-arms race and the wisdom of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and other foreign countries. "As an essential complement to these activities," says Ellsberg, "I've participated in several dozen actions of nonviolent civil disobedience." The activist, who has been awarded the Tom Paine Award from the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee and the Gandhi Peace Award, asserts: "Courage is contagious. It benefits from examples."

I visited Daniel Ellsberg in his home near San Francisco. His replies to questions, while often lengthy and detailed, retain the incisive bite of a man who has convictions—and acts on them.

**GISELA MARTINE GETTY:** The political identity of America is closely connected to our image of the Soviet Union as the enemy. Now this image is being shaken up by Gorbachev. The world views him as a man who is sincere about nuclear disarmament and ending the arms race.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** Gorbachev has clearly called America's bluff on the subject of ending the nuclear arms race. Every American president of the last generation has told us that he wanted, above all, to stop the nuclear arms build-up and to reverse it. That is not true for so much as one of them; we have not had any American administration that was in fact willing to end the arms race. In the Soviet Union, I think, there is a leadership now that does want to end nuclear proliferation, and that has thrown our Administration and our NATO allies into something of a panic.

**GMG:** But are the Soviets really sincere?

**DE:** Up till now that's been very hard to say, because their proposals, which were often good, were so certain to be rejected by the various American administrations that one couldn't be sure of the Soviets' good faith in proposing them. It was clear that Brezhnev was not prepared to take any initiative in reducing arms and was determined to maintain parity with the United States. So he wasn't willing to accept any arrangement that would have left the Soviets behind the U.S. in any respect, or any deal that would have involved giving up more warheads than the U.S. Those constraints assured the continued arms race.

Now Gorbachev is making proposals that do involve giving up many more Soviet warheads than the U.S., and that's one indication of his real desire for a deal. Moreover, he is actually stopping nuclear testing, first for some 9 months and then for a total of about 18 months. He went very far to convince the world that he genuinely wanted an end to the arms race. **GMG:** And that was a unilateral decision.

**DE:** Yes, that was something I actually went to the Soviet Union and proposed back in 1982, under Brezhnev.

**GMG:** You went with the Greenpeace ship, the *Sirius*, to Leningrad. What happened there?

**DE:** We went with the intention of releasing several thousand helium-filled balloons over Leningrad harbor, with the demand written in Russian for the Soviets to stop testing immediately. We also had discussions with a number of people who came from Moscow from the Institute for the Study of the U.S.A. [*I.S.U.S.A.*]; I urged them to take the initiative to stop testing for six months or so, in hopes that that would inspire Congress in turn to join the Soviets' moratorium on testing. I wanted to follow the course that ended the Vietnam War, which was for Congress to cut off the money for it.

**GMG:** Is there an opportunity for major arms control either under Reagan or after Reagan?

**DE:** I think what's clear from the major proposals that were made by Gorbachev in Iceland and elsewhere is that an American president who wanted to stem the arms race and to sharply reduce the nuclear weapons could get very drastic reductions in agreement with the Soviets. That does not include President Reagan. He would accept that only in the context of the Soviets allowing deployment of Star Wars, which means the abandonment of the ABM Treaty, the single major restraint on the arms race that's been ratified up to this point. And the Soviets aren't going to do that.

**GMG:** Does SDI [*Strategic Defense Initiative*] really preclude the ending of the arms race?

**DE:** Yes. If the Star Wars system is deployed, both sides will end up increasing their offensive weapons in order to penetrate the other side's defenses, rather than reducing. And everyone in the world, except Reagan, seems to know that. So, the U.S. has to choose between Star Wars and reductions in nuclear weapons, and for Reagan that's easy: He chooses Star Wars. He doesn't really believe in the necessity or even the desirability of ending the arms race.

**GMG:** But doesn't he want to go down in

history as the president who stopped nuclear proliferation?

**DE:** I think he has several objectives that he cares about much more. One is achieving Star Wars, and the other is toppling the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. In fact, to the extent that he cares about history, I'm convinced that he wants to go down in history as having achieved something in the nuclear area much greater than mere reductions in nuclear weapons, and that is, as he puts it, making nuclear weapons actually impotent and obsolete by a perfect Star Wars defense, a so-called astrodome defense, which warheads would be unable to penetrate. The idea is completely unachievable, and I'm sure everyone in the Pentagon, let alone outside it, understands that—except Reagan.

**GMG:** Reagan's dream for an astrodome protection sounds like an idea that he brought back from his time in the movies, in Hollywood.

**DE:** It was in a movie, a World War II film [*Murder in the Air*, 1940], in which there was a secret of a perfect defense that was sought by the Germans. As a matter of fact, Reagan's character had to protect it from the Germans. That's probably where he first got this interest in a defense that would work perfectly.

**GMG:** The congressional hearings of Colonel North and Admiral Poindexter are over. And, for now at least, Reagan is practically escaping criticism in the whole affair.

**DE:** Reagan is not the only member of our government or society who is involved in the process of denial. At the beginning of this affair, I expected that Reagan's impeachment would be unavoidable. That's unlikely now since the congressional hearings have shown an ability to deny, to avoid and to ignore certain realities. Specifically, at the heart of the contra-supply operation is a heavy drug involvement by the supporting network with the knowledge of the C.I.A. I've been following the affidavits and the depositions that have arisen in the Christie Institute [*a public-interest law firm in Washington, D.C.*] suit very closely. The suit was brought against 29 members of the North network—including Secord and North assistants Owen and Hakim—as early as May 1986, or well before Hasenfus went down in his plane in Nicaragua and began opening up the affair publicly. Their suit alleges that these people were all involved in the conspiracy, among other things, to assassinate Eden Pastora in May 1984 because he was refusing to cooperate with the C.I.A. campaign against Nicaragua. There is much testimony in that suit now that the support operation for the contras was financed significantly by fees and profits from the running of cocaine from Colombia through the contra support base on John Hull's ranch in Costa Rica and then up to the United States. In fact, the special prosecutor, as of now, seems to be investigating allegations that Attorney General Meese and others had interfered with the investigation in the Justice Department of these drug-running operations. This may well be the key to the plan, which North revealed, to set up a "self-sustaining," "private" structure for covert operations that would not have to turn to Congress for money and wouldn't be subject to congressional criticism, or for that matter to criticism even within the executive branch.

**GMG:** So the question is, of course, where would the money to finance these operations come from?

**DE:** Exactly, and the answer is, probably from involvement in arms deals, as in the

Iran case, but also from involvement in drug logistics, particularly cocaine. This is nothing new for the C.I.A. and, in fact, for these very individuals who were involved in the contra case. Peter Dale Scott, who is a Berkeley professor now in Washington assisting in several of these investigations, has pointed out that it is not a coincidence that when the C.I.A. was running covert operations in Southeast Asia, the United States had a heroin epidemic, and that now that the C.I.A. is running operations in Central America we have a cocaine epidemic. In both cases the local people that the C.I.A. was working with were heavily involved in drug running. The C.I.A. knew this and increasingly saw the advantages of operations that were financed in ways that were not subject to congressional appropriations. This is such a central part of these current operations that I felt sure that it would have come out by now. I didn't foresee that the Select Committee investigating the Iran-contra operations would make such a clear choice of turning its eyes away from any such issue.

**GMG:** Was that a deliberate and conscious choice?

**DE:** Yes, they have interpreted their mandate very narrowly and have chosen not to pursue this subject. They didn't question even the people who are known, through their testimony, to be heavily involved in the drug aspects, such as Felix Rodriguez. But other subcommittees in Congress are getting into it, and perhaps by the time this interview appears it will have emerged more. Another aspect that I expected to come out much more than it has is the terrorist background of a number of the people involved in the operation, such as those people involved in El Salvador who support the contra air-supply drops, including Felix Rodriguez himself and his assistant, Luis Posada, who is an escapee from a Venezuelan prison, where he was being held for the bombing of a Cubana airline plane in which 72 people died.

**GMG:** The whole operation raises some larger questions that have hardly been explored in the hearings. The main one is: What was the real strategy for overthrowing the Sandinista regime and what was the role the contras played in it?

**DE:** As of last fall there was a great deal of evidence emerging that the Reagan Administration intended an invasion of Nicaragua this spring, and that only the Irangate debacle derailed that operation. That would make sense of a great deal that had been done earlier, in way of preparations for an invasion in Honduras and in the training and maneuvers that had been going on for several years. That would cast the role of the contras in a new light. It would make the contra operation merely a stage in a strategy that was intended to overthrow the whole regime and mainly a political preparation for a much more decisive stage, which would be the use of U.S. troops. The Tower Commission brought out testimony that North envisioned the contras taking a small piece of territory in Nicaragua, probably a port like Puerto Cabezas, which would then be recognized by the U.S. government as the real government of Nicaragua. Then we would support them directly with U.S. troops, who would then be capable of taking Managua, in a way that the contras never will. As North puts it, once they had taken a beachhead, the President would have a choice between abandoning our forces—as he feels Kennedy did at the Bay of Pigs—or of backing them up, as he feels Kennedy should have done at the Bay of Pigs. Of course, had Kennedy done that at



the Bay of Pigs, we might still be fighting Cuban guerrillas to this day, and if North's plans had been followed, we would be fighting Nicaraguan guerrillas for a very long time. But, I think, that's why the American people, for all their admiration of North on television, still do not favor aid to the contras, let alone an American invasion.

**GMG:** I think there are people who have learned from the Vietnam experience, and they would put up a very strong resistance. **DE:** Yes, and I think it would be much stronger than in the Vietnam case. We have millions of people who have learned and are determined not to see this country go through an unwanted war again. Some 90,000 people, of whom I'm one, have pledged to take part in organized civil disobedience in the event of such an escalation. And many thousands, including myself, have already gone to jail several times in protest against smaller measures of involvement, like the embargo against Nicaragua.

**GMG:** Is the Reagan Administration aware of this?

**DE:** Again, I think the Administration has made plans for it, and once again we find Colonel North's fingerprints on these plans. Several newspapers, including the Village Voice, have now broken the story that North was a planner in the White House involved in crafting emergency measures in the event that there was major resistance to a presidential invasion of a foreign country, and the stories are that these plans involved suspending the Constitution and invoking military rule throughout the country. Again, the Christie Institute, going back almost two years now, came across these plans, which I don't think had then been associated with Colonel North, and details them in an affidavit by Daniel Sheehan, the Christie Institute's chief attorney. This affidavit mentions, among other things, the detention of several hundred thousand Central American aliens, that is, noncitizens in this country, in the event of such a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua, and also a detention of thousands of American citizens who are regarded as security risks. I would expect that I'm included on that list. This plan would be indistinguishable from a military coup. Can you imagine that Reagan could possibly contemplate such drastic measures and such a change in our society?

**GMG:** Has this plan actually been associated with the President?

**DE:** No, not directly. It was centered in the FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency], which was then headed by a certain Louis Giuffrida. Now, Giuffrida had been one of the high officers in the California National Guard, when Reagan was governor of California, and Ron Ridenhour, the man who broke the My Lai story, had revealed in very detailed reporting at that time that Reagan had taken part in a number of exercises of military rule in the late '60s, in California, in response to an emergency caused by students and other unrest at that time. When Reagan became President, Giuffrida moved to be head of the FEMA, where this plan was apparently prepared by Colonel North. Whether Reagan could contemplate such a possibility, I think, is answered by the whole attitude we found revealed by his subordinates and Reagan himself in connection with the Irangate scandal. On one hand, Reagan's defense has largely shifted from saying that he knew nothing about the aid to the contras—which was forbidden by law in Congress by the so-called Boland Amendment—to saying it was his idea in the first place but that he didn't

believe the N.S.C. [National Security Council] was covered by the Boland Amendment, or that he himself could possibly be bound by that law or by any other concerning the implementation of foreign policy. As we all know, far more than the N.S.C. was involved, including the President's immediate office. We find that North called on and got support from virtually every branch of the national security apparatus—the Defense Department, the C.I.A., the State Department and the Armed Services. So what Reagan is really saying is that Congress cannot bind the executive branch in the field of foreign policy or national security policy, and that Congress can't even do that by the power of its purse, by forbidding funding under the Boland Amendment.

**GMG:** The plan for emergency measures, what you call the military rule measures, seems almost too sinister to be believed.

**DE:** It is certainly much less likely to be invoked now because an invasion has become much less likely as a result of Iran-gate. But in fact, this country is at a crossroads in its Constitutional system. North and Poindexter have not testified with any repentance for their actions. They have laid out, proudly and with conviction, a point of view that we know is shared by Ronald Reagan. Essentially, the President does not share with Congress the spirit of the Constitution, and he does not want to share with Congress the conduct of foreign policy or nuclear arms.

Reagan's conception is that it's essential for the President to have freedom from congressional restraint to use any measures he deems necessary to protect the national interest as he alone defines it. Now, that is not a new attitude in the world. It's a very familiar one. It's the same attitude that the colonists in this country rebelled against a little over 200 years ago. It was the attitude of the then mightiest ruler at the time, George III, who said, among other things, "I desire what is right, therefore anyone who disagrees with me is a traitor." That was very much the attitude, I think, of the Nixon crew and is very clearly the attitude of those who serve Ronald Reagan.

North, I would say, would have been a very good marine officer in the British Army under George III, advising Hessians. Something in his education went wrong and left him unable to distinguish Adolfo Calero from George Washington. The basic proposition that North and Poindexter were advancing in a couple of weeks of testimony was that the executive must have the right to undertake major violent operations and warlike interventions against other countries in secret, even from Congress. That capability would not just be a loophole for exceptional operations; it would essentially mean the abandonment of legislative restraint on executive foreign policy, since the Congress henceforth would have no way of knowing what the actual overall policy of the United States might be or who our actual working allies or enemies might be. It would mean the abandonment of the checks and balances of the Constitution and the institutionalizing of a different form of government—essentially a monarchy.

When Reagan proclaimed proudly, "I am a contra," he spoke more truth than most people understood. Reagan is a contra, that is, a counter-revolutionary against the American Revolution and against the Constitution that followed from it. And if he succeeds in institutionalizing the secret practices that he has been engaging in over the last several years, he will have changed



the nature of this society away from democracy as ominously and decisively as if we had been invaded and occupied by a foreign authoritarian power. Again I see a strong parallel with the Vietnam War situation of nearly 20 years ago. It was in April 1970, at the time of the Cambodian invasion, a year after I had given the Pentagon Papers to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee but still a year before they came out in the newspapers, that I testified before Senator Fulbright's Committee. I remarked then that I had often asked myself while I was in the government what the real meaning was of the words "vital interest for the United States" and that I'd come to realize one very clear vital interest, and that was our interest in ending the Vietnam War. I felt that if it continued, the resistance to it would grow in such a way, and the repression would grow in such a way, that our form of government would change decisively.

**GMG:** But to get back to the present situation: Do you think Poindexter is covering up for Reagan?

**DE:** I feel certain that Poindexter kept the President informed on these matters, which were precisely what the President would have wanted to know and been elated to know. And in the case of Congress, I think they did not want the responsibility of knowing that they were being defied by this popular President. They did not want the challenge of trying to enforce their will. Notice that we finally learned about the Iran-contra affair not by the workings of our media, but from the very people whom North and Poindexter had trusted to keep this secret from Congress, namely the Iranians with whom they were dealing. And without that leak we wouldn't have known it. The point is that the government

has been changing under our feet and behind the back of Congress.

**GMG:** Americans like North because they believe more in image than reality; he is like a movie star.

**DE:** Yes, they like him personally, but they apply the same rule to Poindexter, whom they don't particularly like. Poindexter has none of North's charisma, but I can very confidently predict that public opinion will be that Poindexter should not be tried for his crimes, either. And the reason is, most Americans feel that to follow orders is an adequate excuse. Polls have actually shown, in a way that surprises many Americans who read about it, that most Americans feel that the Nazi subordinates should not have been punished and that the excuse of orders is a defensible excuse. They don't accept the so-called Nuremberg principle that the U.S. proposed and supported. I don't want to see North and Poindexter simply as scapegoats, either. But I obviously don't accept the idea that they are not responsible at all.

**GMG:** You were once put on trial yourself.

**DE:** Yes, but my trial was not for telling lies and keeping secrets, but for defying my superiors and telling truths that they didn't want told. And I did that because I learned a different lesson from the Nuremberg trials—that people should feel themselves accountable for the policies in which they participate, especially if those policies are wrong or illegal or deceptive. I was accused of breaking promises to keep those secrets, and I did that, but I came to see that a promise to lie to the American public is a promise that should never be made by an American. It is a promise that should be broken as soon as one sees it for what it really is. □